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A study was presented that helped students acquire social amenities, learn to converse well, and become more responsible and cooperative in achieving goals for the group. Upon review of the situation at the Daytona Beach Enrichment Center, it was decided that the period that would most benefit from attention to these skills was the lunch period. Accordingly, a program of conversational dining was planned. To provide an atmosphere conducive to good manners, colorful plastic place mats were purchased by the parent's association, the children provided a centerpiece for each table, chairs and table settings were arranged ahead of time, empty lunch boxes were kept on the floor beside the chairs, and attractive bulletin boards were designed. Films on good manners were shown. Seating charts were prepared and the children changed from table to table during the course of the year.

Most of the children had not had any experience in carrying on a good conversation; many thought that the accepted way to eat was in silence. Frequent topics of conversation included events and hobbies. At the end of the school year a questionnaire administered to the children participating in the program indicated that 80 percent were in favor of the program; older children who wanted to sit with friends did not favor the program. The children liked becoming acquainted with more children, appreciated the atmosphere, felt that their manner and conversation improved, and felt that they learned to listen to others and to include others in the conversation. The program facilitated growth, intellectual stimulation, creative leadership abilities, and self-confidence.

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CONVERSATIONAL DINING

PLANS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT
1963-64

Cooperative Program in Elementary Education
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Office of Education

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Instructional Enrichment Center
Daytona Beach, Florida

Madeline H. Beck, Instructor
Charlotte M. Price, Instructor

VOLUSIA COUNTY SCHOOLS
John H. Smiley, Superintendent

ED002708

During these first six years that the Daytona Beach Enrichment Center has been in operation, the curriculum has included the four major areas of study which have been recommended by most authorities on the gifted. These areas are:

1. Humanities
2. Mathematics
3. Social Science
4. Natural Science

The program at the Center has always included current problems and challenging experiences which will help the gifted student live effectually in our rapidly changing world; as well as enabling him to utilize the many leadership opportunities that may present themselves. By encouraging creativity and originality, we have followed the second part of Crawford Greenewalt's observation, "Conformity in behavior is a human necessity; conformity in pattern of thought is a human danger." It is this year that we have given more thought to the first part of his statement.

Dr. Virgil Ward, in his book, Educating the Gifted, states: "..technique of science be brought to bear upon the development in gifted children and youth of personal and social adjustment which will free them for their most effective social interaction and for the attainment of greatest personal happiness."

In October 1960, he wrote a paper for the Council for Exceptional Children on building curriculum for the gifted. He listed the four traditionally accepted areas, but added a new area, that of personal development. This includes personal and social skills, moral development, intellectual and academic development, practical skills, etc. He suggests a "deliberate search for specific skills, conceptions and habits respecting morals and even manners, which will facilitate the youngster's progress in attaining self-realization in the social world."

In reviewing our situation at the Center, we decided that the area, which would most benefit from attention to these skills, was the lunch period. Our school has no cafeteria service. Tables of lunch boxes made a picnic type atmosphere which was not conducive to good manners.

Our study concerned itself with ways in which we could help the students acquire social amenities, learn to converse well and to become more responsible and cooperative in achieving goals for the group. We planned our project for the groups who come the first four days of the week, because the third graders who come on Friday, have lunch at their home schools.

Dr. Ward had also suggested the educational application of a scientific method in the field of adjustive behavior by use of the following steps:

1. Systematic working out of behavior
2. Clarification of goals
3. Discovery of effect of methods of promotion and development through experimentation and measurement
4. Diagnosis and remedial endeavor when original processes appear to have failed with certain individuals

We started our project by following these steps.

To provide an atmosphere conducive to good manners:

1. Colorful plastic place mats were purchased by the parent's association for use by all groups
2. The children were asked to provide a centerpiece for each table
3. Chairs and table settings were to be arranged ahead of time
4. Empty lunchboxes were to be kept on the floor beside the chairs
5. Attractive bulletin boards were designed

To provide the children with necessary background information and to make them aware of good manners, we initiated a program of instruction.

First, bulletin boards were constructed before the children arrived. The boards used cartoons to illustrate good and bad table manners. The groups considered these in conjunction with a general discussion of the project.

We also obtained some films on manners and referred the students to several appropriate books in our library. Tiffany's Table Manners for Teen-Agers by Ives Washburn, Inc., was especially helpful.

In order to promote a closer acquaintance among the children who come from so many different schools, a special seating chart was planned. Each week two of the eight children at a table left it and moved on to another table where they usually remained four weeks. During the year each child was at each table for two periods, each time with different children. The last four times at the Center, they were free to sit according to choice.

A host or hostess was appointed for each table. He was responsible for guiding the conversation and for seeing that the table was left clean with place mats washed. We encouraged the host to plan a centerpiece for his table. Each child served as host or hostess once during the year for a four week period. (Each child comes to the Center only once a week so that meant being host four times.)

We decided that an important part of "dining" as opposed to simply "eating", is good conversation. Many of the students had thought that the accepted way to eat was in silence or saying very little in a low voice. Others liked to concentrate on a best friend, ignoring the others at the table. We discovered that they had had very little previous experience in carrying on good conversations.

The first day was a get-acquainted session. Each child was to learn the name, grade, school and hobby of every one else at his table. This assignment was very successful. During the following weeks, current events were discussed. The nuances and subtleties of conversational skills required by these topics brought to light the weakness of many children in this area.

The ability to carry on an interesting group conversation, was a skill considered essential by the Cleveland Program for the Gifted. There, the students, taking turns as leaders, helped the group to keep its subject, and were responsible for seeing that all in the group were included in the conversation. Considering this, we devoted time to instruction and practice of this skill.

During these practice sessions, misconceptions concerning conversation emerged. When baseball was the topic, girls refused to take part, saying they knew nothing about it. They gradually learned to ask questions and some even acquired new interests. When the hosts were first urged to include everyone, a two way conversation developed. The others at the table had to learn to take some responsibility in carrying on the conversation. The exploration of someone else's topic did not come naturally to the students.

Because much of the children's conversation centered about current events, skills in newspaper reading came under scrutiny. The filmstrips on newspaper reading from our Materials Center facilitated their understanding and encouraged more frequent reading of the news.

In the beginning of the year we scheduled an after lunch period of sharing and evaluating the individual table conversations. Our general impression the first weeks varied according to the previous acquaintances of the children. One day nine different schools were represented. The children were quiet and shy. They were very cooperative, however, and tried to converse. They soon became better acquainted and conversation developed. Another day the group was composed of children from only two schools. There was little reserve and much less need for getting acquainted. They conversed readily, discussing travel to other countries.

During the year, various types of centerpieces graced the tables. The first week the teachers introduced the centerpiece as an example. An Oriental theme anticipated the children's work contracts on the Orient. Later the students made paper decorations, brought in real and artificial flowers, flags, dolls, collections, and even food appeared as centerpieces. One child made name cards with fortunes inside, and a fourth grader made a Jack Horner pie with a key of knowledge attached to each place card. Sometimes the hostess brought colorful napkins or nut cups of mints. Many of the holidays were observed in the table decorations. The children seemed surprised and pleased as well as better behaved with the party-like atmosphere.

Toward the end of the year we prepared and administered the attached questionnaire. The specific reactions and comments revealed a much more detailed and inclusive picture than we had been able to obtain by our observations alone.

Eighty percent of the children who had been here liked the new plan better than that of the previous year. The twenty percent who liked it less were mainly seventh graders who preferred to associate with their own group.

Of those who commented on these reasons for preferring this year's plan, most liked it better because of the atmosphere and next because of the opportunities for becoming better acquainted.

COMMENTS BY THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED IN LAST YEAR'S LUNCH PROGRAM

Reasons for Preferring This Year	Percent Commenting
Atmosphere	40%
Wider Acquaintance	27%
Conversational Skills	10%
Manners	10%

Reasons for Preferring Previous Programs	Percent Commenting
Could Sit with Friends	7%
Could Talk as Pleased	6%

The newcomers to the lunch program appeared to have the same reactions as the students who had been here before. Eighty percent of the new students liked the new lunch program without giving any adverse criticism. Twenty percent had some criticism.

The following table shows the comments given by these two groups of students:

COMMENTS GIVEN BY MOST OF THE 80% WHO FAVORED THE LUNCH PROGRAM

Reasons for Liking	Percent
Better Acquainted	50%
Atmosphere, Manners	37%
Conversation	13%

COMMENTS GIVEN BY ALL OF THE 20% WHO HAD SOME CRITICISM OF THE LUNCH PROGRAM

Reasons for Not Liking	Percent
Seating	45%
Noise	36%
Some not Contributing to Conversation	19%

Half of the newcomers who favored the new program, commented on the value of opportunity to become better acquainted with a large number of children. A large number appreciated the attractive and congenial atmosphere. Of the twenty percent who criticized aspects of the program, some mentioned parts of it that they liked. Most of the children who wanted changes, wanted to be allowed to sit with close friends all the time. We do not consider this to be in their best interests. Perhaps regularly scheduled free choice periods should be allowed. In some cases the complaint about noise was by a child who thought eating should be done in silence. At times the voices would raise and reminders were necessary.

Almost all the students (94%) gave the new arrangement credit for helping them become better acquainted. 98% said they had improved in conversational skills and 87% in table manners.

The following table shows the areas and extent of improvement in conversation.

IMPROVEMENT IN CONVERSATION

Include Others	72%
Listen to Others	84%
Kind Remarks	40%
Ask Questions	71%
Contribute Information	66%
Proper Topics	41%
Lower Voice	57%

The area of greatest improvement in the students' estimation was listening to others. Next in importance was including others in the conversation and asking questions. Almost as many indicated that they now contribute more information to the group.

In addition to the check lists the questionnaire provided opportunities for comments from those who experienced considerable improvement in manners. A total of 50% wrote comments on the questionnaire indicating areas in which they had improved. The greatest number of comments were on courtesy and general behavior. A close third was improvement in posture. Elbows off the table, not talking with the mouth full, and chewing with the mouth closed were also mentioned.

Some of the students volunteered suggestions for next year. More than one child made some of the suggestions. Several children said, "Keep it the way it is."

THE SUGGESTIONS WERE AS FOLLOWS:

For Seating
1. No assigned seats
2. Boys' tables and girls' tables
3. One large table for whole class
4. Teachers at children's table
5. Change tables less frequently

For Atmosphere
1. Require centerpieces
2. Assign a person to say grace
3. Provide napkins
4. No host
5. Lower voices

For Conversation
1. Assign special topics each week
2. No assigned topics

We believe that our Conversational Dining project was basically a success. It facilitated growth in the following important areas:

1. Self-confidence in social situations
2. Consideration of others
3. Responsibility and cooperation
4. Intellectual stimulation
5. Leadership abilities
6. Creativity

The ability to get along with others and to have confidence in social situations may well mean the difference between success and failure in life. The experience gained by these children should prove invaluable to them. Not all children brought or prepared centerpieces, but all took responsibility in setting up and clearing the table. Most felt a responsibility to the group in seeing that all the children were included in the conversation. Helping a shy child develop his ideas in conversation, learning to listen and comment on the other person's views and reading the newspaper with an eye for conversational items, make the students more alert to ways of thinking as well as current events. It is also an invaluable aid in developing leadership qualities. In addition, many of the children came up with very creative ideas in table settings.

The project might have had even better results if we had continued to devote class time to it after the first few sessions; and, of course, our lack of cafeteria service made it difficult to create a proper atmosphere. However, the students carried on well by themselves. The students were neater and more careful with their manners. They seemed to feel more responsible for including all the children at their table in the conversation and there were no complaints about unsuitable topics. Conversational skills improved, as did consideration of others. Much room has been left for improvement, but much progress has been made.

LUNCH PERIOD QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Have you become better acquainted through changing seats at lunch?

2. Have you improved your manners?

3. Have you improved your conversation? Yes___ No___

   How:

   ___ Try to include others
   ___ Listen to others
   ___ Kind remarks
   ___ Asks questions
   ___ Contributes information
   ___ Proper topics
   ___ Lower voices
   ___ Other (state)

4. If you were here last year:
   Do you like the lunch situation better?
   Why or why not?

5. If you are new this year:
   What do you like or dislike about the lunch situation? (Disregard lack of cafeteria service)

6. Do you have suggestions for another year?